

Handling Difficult Conversations at Work

Is this you?

Have you ever been in one of those heated conversations where you say "I'm not going to talk any more, you aren't listening to me!" Or perhaps you find yourself saying "Just tell me what you want me to say! I thought we were going to discuss this, but you just want me to agree with you!"

Sound familiar? - We all get caught up in difficult conversations during the day. In fact, it's been estimated that, on average, managers spend 20% of their time resolving conflict. Just think what else you could do with that time if people were able to handle conflict better!

Avoiding conflict - or something else?

Few people enjoy conflict, and some of us would even admit "Yes, I'm a conflict avoider!" But sometime ago I heard someone say "We don't avoid conflict, we avoid confrontation."

When you think about it, it's true: the conflict is still there, we are just avoiding the confrontation that comes with trying to resolve it!

There are 3 reasons why we do this:

- we feel uncomfortable trying to talk to someone about it
- we're unsure whether it will do any good, and
- we're worried that it might actually make things worse!

No wonder we don't try! But there are things we can do to handle these conversations better.

The two things we need to do better

Think back to those two conversations in the opening paragraph. The reason why these conversations are so difficult is because of two issues: a **lack of respect** ("you aren't listening to me"), and a **lack of a mutual purpose** ("just tell me what you want me to say, you're just trying to talk me into it".)

These two things are the basic conditions for having a better conversation. If either is absent, one of the parties to the conversation will either withdraw from the conversation (they'll walk away) or stop being actively involved (they'll clam up).

So to make sure this doesn't happen, we need to build these two things into the next difficult conversation we have:

Respect - you must show the other person that you respect them, their knowledge and their opinion, even if you disagree with them. Don't say "But that's not right!" or "How could you possibly think that!" Instead say "That's interesting, could you please explain more to me about why you see it that way?" The other person will stay in the conversation, and you'll learn more about how the problem can be resolved.

Mutual purpose - remember that they're worried that you are trying to talk them into something! Make sure they can see that you're not. Instead of trying to persuade the other person, say "I can see we disagree on this, but I really want us to come up with something we're both happy with." Repeat this if the other person seems concerned about your intention.

In summary: confrontation makes us feel uncomfortable. Maintaining respect and a mutual purpose improves our comfort levels, making it easier for us to discuss difficult issues.